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A Letter from  
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN  
to Benjamin Vaughan



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A LETTER from  
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

*Passy, April 21, 1785*

TO BENJAMIN VAUGHAN

CONTAINING  
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PRODIGAL  
PRACTICES OF PUBLISHERS

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*With an Introduction by* CARL VAN DOREN



PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY  
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1949



## Acknowledgment and Explanation

**T**HIS brochure, like that of the DuPerron map of Yorktown issued by the Library in 1942, is the result of a happy concurrence of good will, pleasing associations, and gratifying cooperation on the part of a number of Friends of the Princeton University Library.

First of all, if so slight a brochure were worthy of bearing a dedicatory page, its salutation would be to the memory of the late Max Farrand, gentleman, scholar, beloved Princetonian, and ardent admirer of that versatile genius, Benjamin Franklin. For it was Max Farrand who, in the course of his assiduous study of Franklin's *Autobiography*, encouraged Mrs. Langdon Marvin of New York and Hallowell, Maine, great-granddaughter of Benjamin Vaughan, to investigate and put in order the family archives which included the Franklin-Vaughan correspondence. Franklin had sent to his young friend Vaughan a manuscript copy of the famous *Autobiography* and Farrand, as he and Mrs. Marvin explored the papers preserved in the eighteenth-century house seated high on a bluff overlooking the Kennebec, no doubt hoped that this manuscript would come to light. Unfortunately, it was not found, but much else of importance to American history was revealed. Mrs. Marvin, stimulated by Farrand's enthusiasm and knowledge, began a systematic arrangement of the papers.

Thomas Jefferson, who was in Paris at the time Franklin wrote this letter and who was a friend of both Franklin and Vaughan, also came into the picture. Since his papers are being edited at Princeton, and since it was known that he had corresponded with Vaughan, the editor of Jefferson naturally found himself following the editor of Franklin to the historic home on the Kennebec. Mrs. Marvin, who needed no further stimulus than that provided by the infectious enthusiasm of Max Farrand, was already deeply engaged in the task of sorting and arranging

the family archives and library. She was graciously hospitable to the editor of Jefferson, he was appreciative, and, in order to make it feasible for her to continue work on the papers during the winter months, the hospitality of the Princeton University Library was offered to her and to the papers.

This offer was accepted, the papers were deposited in the Library, and Mrs. Marvin continued her work, making important discoveries from time to time as she proceeded. Among these interesting discoveries was the letter of April 21, 1785, presented herewith. When it was brought to the attention of Carl Van Doren, E. Harold Hugo of the Meriden Gravure Company, and P. J. Conkwright of the Princeton University Press, all agreed that it should be properly published, especially because of its observations on the subject of "puffed-up" typographers. All, though they are exceedingly busy men, agreed to cooperate in bringing out in a worthy format Franklin's charming letter to his young friend.

This acknowledgment, therefore, must be an expression of gratitude to many: to the Earl of Shelburne for his unwitting part in making possible the warm friendship between his young secretary and the great diplomat and sage; to Benjamin Franklin for responding so heartily to Vaughan's friendly and admiring personality; to Max Farrand for discovering the important Vaughan family papers and for stimulating Mrs. Marvin to do something about them; to Mrs. Marvin for her cordial cooperation with scholars interested in American history, for her important work on the family archives, and for her gracious permission to publish this letter; to Carl Van Doren, who interrupted his busy and significant days to listen to our importunings, for an introduction which, in sly humor, disposes of everything in Franklin's letter that the most pedantic inquirer might ask about. To all of these, on behalf of the Friends of the Library who are their beneficiaries, I should like to express our warmest gratitude.

JULIAN P. BOYD  
*Librarian*



## Introduction

**I**N March 1785 John Perry, a London shipbuilder whose dockyard was at Blackwall, took his two young sons to Paris to place them in school or *pension* for a few months to learn the French language. He took with him also a letter of introduction to Benjamin Franklin, United States minister to France, from his young Anglo-American friend and disciple Benjamin Vaughan. Vaughan, who hesitated to give the letter but could not well avoid it, sent by Perry a second bottle of Blackrie's Lixivium, a proprietary nostrum with which Franklin was already familiar.

This Lixivium, sometimes called Blackrie's Solvent, was not new. As far back as 1763 Alexander Blackrie, a London apothecary, had objected to a certain Dr. Chittick's secretive and expensive treatment of stone in the bladder. In October of that year Blackrie contributed a letter to *The Scots Magazine*, in which he declared that Chittick's remedy was only soap lye with tansy in it to conceal the taste, administered in veal broth. Blackrie made a similar broth, put in "different quantities of alkaline salts" and soap lye "in the proportion of four teaspoonfuls to a pint," and enough tansy to flavor it. Three years later he expanded his *Scots Magazine* letter to *A Disquisition on Medicines which dissolve the Stone; in which Dr. Chittick's Secret is considered and discovered* (London, 1766, 2nd edition 1771). In time he seems to have settled down to soap lye, lime water, and perhaps tansy still, bottled and profitably sold as his Solvent or Lixivium.

Franklin in 1785 had for three years been suffering from a bladder stone, and had made numerous efforts to find some medicine which would remove or reduce the painful obstruction. Jan Ingenhousz, physician to the Emperor in Vienna, had recommended Blackrie's Solvent in a letter of February 10, 1784. Replying on April 29, 1785, Franklin said he had taken the

remedy heretofore, and was now taking it again, presumably from the second bottle sent over from London by Vaughan. It can hardly have done more good than the first, but it led Franklin on May 19 to write to his grandnephew Jonathan Williams in London asking for a copy of Blackrie's *Disquisition*.

On April 21 Franklin replied to Vaughan's letter of March 22 which had introduced Perry and accompanied the medicine. Franklin's letter was printed by his grandson William Temple Franklin in 1817, presumably from the copy now in the Library of Congress, and has since then been regularly reprinted by later editors. It is here for the first time printed from the actual copy sent to Vaughan, brought by Vaughan to Hallowell, Maine, in 1797.

As it has never before been printed as Franklin actually sent it, so it has never been furnished with the annotation necessary to make all the allusions in it clear. Mr. Perry has been identified, but Blackrie's Solvent has not been analyzed, in this connection, to its nauseous, dangerous ingredients. To go further in elucidation, Franklin had bought his copy of Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-69) in Ireland in September-October 1771. The "Figaro" which he sent to Vaughan was of course *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais which, after much opposition from Louis XVI and the censors, had been at last produced in April 1784. According to Fleury, it had a run, extraordinary at that time, of seventy-five successive performances. "Le Roy Voyageur" was an anonymous pamphlet, with the full title *Le Roi Voyageur, ou Examen des abus de l'administration de la Lydie*, which pretended to deal with the ancient Lydian empire of Croesus but was unmistakably about contemporary France. The author is now known to have been Jean-André Perrault. The pamphlet, dated 1784, was said on the title-page to have been printed in London by "T. P. Cadel," but this was probably a subterfuge. The Dr. Price mentioned was Franklin's friend, and America's, the Reverend Richard Price, to whom Franklin had sent a copy of *Testament de Fortuné Ricard*, (Lyons, 1785), by

Charles-Joseph Mathon de la Cour of Lyon. This was the essay which suggested to Franklin the bequests he made to Boston and Philadelphia of a thousand pounds each to be kept at compound interest for two hundred years. Price printed a translation of the *Testament* in an appendix to the 1785 edition of his *Observations on the importance of the American Revolution and the means of rendering it a benefit to the World* (1784).

The letter of Franklin to Vaughan of April 21, 1785 has been best known for its protest against the London publishers' habit of making books larger than they needed to be, so that "the selling of Paper seems now the Object, and Printing on it only the Pretence"—a habit which has lately been revived to a foolish and grotesque extent in New York. "I inclose," Franklin says, "the Copy of a Page in a late Comedy." Research has failed to find any such comedy. Almost certainly Franklin made up the names of the characters and the dialogue in another of his hoaxes. He had done the same thing at least once before: in a scene he said, in a letter to David Hartley on February 3, 1779, he recollected from "the comick Farce intituled, *God-send or The Wreckers*." The "Erasmus's Colloquies" which he cites as examples of pages "printed running on" may have been the English translations of the famous *Colloquia* in either Sir Roger L'Estrange's *Twenty Select Colloquies of Erasmus* (1680 and later editions) or Nathan (or Nathaniel) Bailey's *All the Familiar Colloquies of Desiderius Erasmus* (1725, 2nd edition 1733).

The only mystery remaining in the letter is Franklin's injunction to Vaughan: "All This *to yourself*; you can easily guess the Reason." The only reason now easy to guess is that some of Franklin's personal friends among the London booksellers, even his old friend William Strahan, may have been the offenders.

CARL VAN DOREN



## Benjamin Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan

Dear Friend,

Passy, April 21. 1785

I receiv'd your kind Letter of the 22<sup>d</sup>  
past & M<sup>r</sup> Perry, with the other Bottle of Blackrie.  
I thank you much for your Care in sending them.  
I should have been glad to be of any Use to M<sup>r</sup>.  
Perry: But he had plac'd his Children before I saw  
him, and he stay'd with me only a few Minutes.

We see much in Parliamentary Proceedings, &  
in Papers & Pamphlets, of the Injury the Concessions  
to Ireland will do to the *Manufacturers* of England,  
while the *People* of England seem to be forgotten,  
as if quite out of the Question. If the Irish can  
manufacture Cottons, & Stuffs, and Silks, & Cloths, & Linnens,  
and Cutlery, & Toys & Books, &c &c &c, so as to sell  
them cheaper in England than the *Manufacturers* of  
England sell them, is not this good for the *People* of  
England who are not *Manufacturers*? and will not  
even the *Manufacturers* themselves share the Benefit?  
since if Cottons are cheaper, *all the other Manufacturers*  
who wear Cottons will save in that Article;—*and so of*  
*the rest*. If Books can be had much cheaper from Ireland,  
(which I believe for I bought Blackstone there for 24s. when  
it was sold in England at 4 Guineas) is not this an Advantage,  
not to English Booksellers indeed, but to English  
Readers, and to Learning? And of all the Complainants  
perhaps these Booksellers are least worthy of Consideration.  
The Catalogue you last sent me amazes me by the high  
Prices, (said to be the lowest) affix'd to every Article.



Dear Friend,

Lassy, April 21. 1785

I received your kind Letter of the 22<sup>nd</sup> past & Mr Perry, with the other Bottle of Blacking. I thank you much for your care in sending them. I should have been glad to be of any Use to Mr Perry: But he had plac'd his children before I saw him, and he stay'd with me only a few Minutes.

We see much in Parliamentary Proceedings, & in Papers & Pamphlets, of the Injury the Concessions to Ireland will do to the Manufacturers of England, while the People of England seem to be forgotten, as if quite out of the Question. If the Irish can manufacture Cottons, & Stuffs, and Silks, & Cloths, & Linens, and Cutlery, & Toys & Books, &c &c &c, so as to sell them cheaper in England than the Manufacturers of England sell them, is not this good for the People of England who are not Manufacturers? and will not even the Manufacturers themselves share the Benefit? since if Cottons are cheaper, all the other Manufacturers who wear Cottons will save in that Article; and so of the rest. If Books can be had much cheaper from Ireland (which I believe for I bought Blackstone there for 2<sup>l</sup>s. when it was sold in England at 4 Guineas) is not this an Advantage,

P. Vaughan Esq<sup>r</sup>

not

not to English Booksellers indeed, but to English  
Readers, and to Learning? And of all the complainants  
perhaps these Booksellers are least worthy of consideration.  
The Catalogue you last sent me amazes me by the high  
Prices, (said to be the lowest) affix'd to every Article.  
And one can scarce see a new Book, without observing  
the excessive Artifices made use of to puff up a Paper  
of Verses into a Pamphlet, a Pamphlet into an Octavo  
Volume; and an Octavo into a Quarto, with Scab-  
boardings, white Lines, sparse Titles of Chapters,  
& exorbitant Margins, to such a degree, that the  
Selling of Paper seems now the Object, and Printing  
on it only the Pretence. I inclose the Copy of a Page  
in a late Comedy. Between every <sup>two</sup> Lines there is a  
white Space equal to another Line. You have  
a Law, I think, against Butchers blowing of Veal  
to make it look fatter; why not one against Book  
sellers blowing of Books to make them look bigger.  
All This to yourself: you can easily guess the  
Reason. -

My Grandson is a little indispos'd, but sends you  
two Pamphlets, Tigris, & Le Roy Voyageur. The  
first is a Play of Beaumarchais, which has had a  
great

great Run here. The other a Representation of all  
the supposed Evils of Government in this Country, some  
of which are probably exaggerated. It is not publicly  
sold. We shall send some more shortly. —

Please to remember me very respectfully and  
affectionately to good Dr Price. I am glad that  
he has printed a Translation of the Testament. It  
may do good. I am ever, my dear Friend,

Yours most sincerely

Benjamin Franklin





And one can scarce see a new Book, without observing the excessive Artifices made use of to puff up a Paper of Verses into a Pamphlet, a Pamphlet into an Octavo Volume, and an Octavo into a Quarto, with Scab-boardings, white Lines, sparse Titles of Chapters, & exorbitant Margins, to such a degree, that the Selling of Paper seems now the Object, and Printing on it only the Pretence. I inclose the Copy of a Page in a late Comedy. Between every two Lines there is a white Space equal to another Line. You have a Law, I think, against Butchers blowing a Veal to make it look fatter; why not one against Booksellers blowing of Books to make them look bigger. All This *to yourself*; you can easily guess the Reason.—

My Grandson is a little indispos'd, but sends you two Pamphlets, Figaro, & Le Roy Voyageur. The first is a Play of Beaumarchais, which has had a great Run here. The other a Representation of all the Suppos'd Errors of Government in this Country, some of which are probably exaggerated. It is not publicly sold. We shall send some more shortly.

Please to remember me very respectfully and affectionately to good D<sup>r</sup> Price. I am glad that he has printed a Translation of the Testament. It may do Good. I am ever, my dear Friend,

Yours most sincerely

B FRANKLIN

SCENE IV.

Sir JOHN DENYNG & WILDMORE

Sir JOHN.  
Whither so fast?

WILDMORE.  
To the Opera

Sir JOHN  
It is not the Day.

WILDMORE  
Yes it is.

Sir JOHN  
Never on a Sunday.

WILDMORE  
Is this Sunday?

Sir JOHN  
Yes surely.

WILDMORE.  
I remember nothing; I shall soon forget  
my Christian Name.—

If this Page was printed running on like Erasmus's Colloquies  
it would not have made more than five Lines.—

Scene IV.  
Sir John Tennyng & Wildmore

Sir John  
Whither so fast?

Wildmore.  
To the Opera.

Sir John  
It is not the Day.

Wildmore  
Yes it is.

Sir John  
Never on a Sunday.

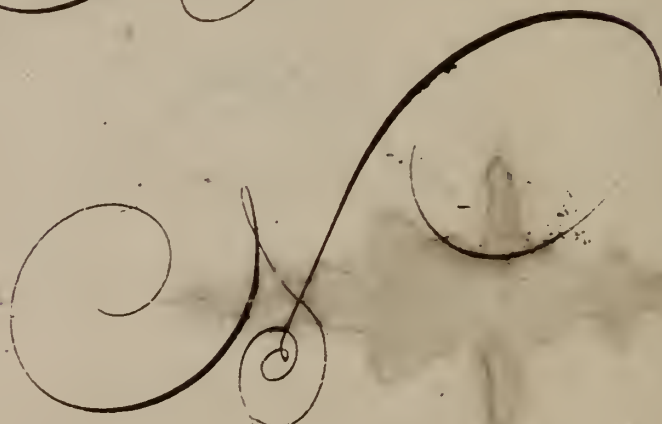
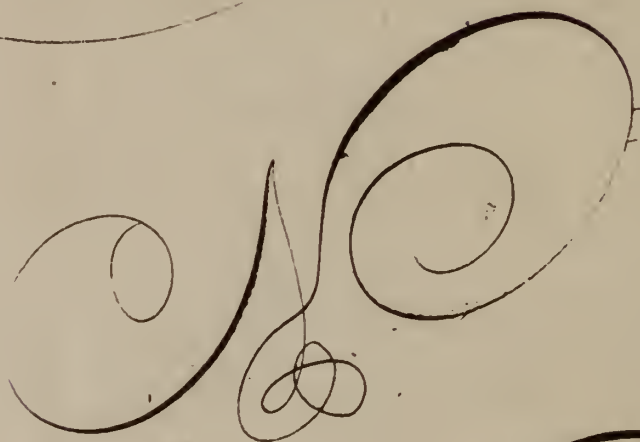
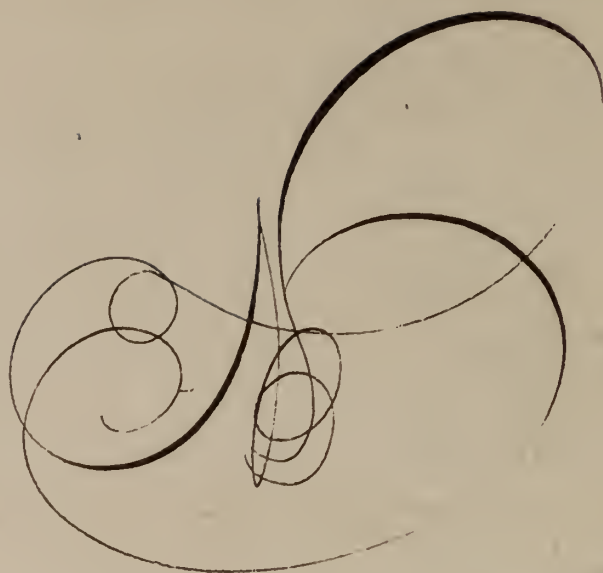
Wildmore  
Is this Sunday?

Sir John  
Yes surely.

Wildmore.  
I remember nothing; I shall soon forget  
my Christian Name. —

If this Page was printed running on like Erasmus's Colloquies  
it would not have made more than five Lines! —

12  
50.  
600  
8h. 21  
68h. 8









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